ROLLO MAY

Existential Psychiatry
an Evaluation

It has now been roughly two years since existential psychiatry became known at all widely in America, chiefly through the publication of *Existence*. That book made available in English some of the works of the leading existential psychiatrists in Europe. It offers a basis for evaluation of the development of existential psychiatry in this country and an assessment of its validity.

Much of the interest in this topic among our colleagues reminds me of an experience with a friend of mine, a young Catholic priest, whom I met on an island in Maine some twenty-five years ago. This young man and I used to go swimming together. One day in my room he noticed on my shelves a number of books by Freud, whom I was then studying. He proceeded to tell me in succinct sentences just why Freud was wrong. Since this was before the time when Freud and other psychotherapists were read in theological seminaries, either Catholic or Protestant, I wondered whether he knew anything about the master of Vienna. When I asked him whether he had read anything about Freud, he answered, “Oh, yes; every student in my seminary is required to read one book about him.” I thought this very enlightened; and I asked what the book was. He answered that the title was *Freud Refuted*.

I assume that my readers will wish to go beyond dogma, either theological or psychiatric, and to inquire what contribution this or any movement has to the understanding of man and his welfare. In this spirit I propose to make my inquiry as frankly and honestly as I can.

There has not yet been time for the existential approach in psychiatry and psychology to find its particular American form; nor time yet for American writings in this area to be significant. So far, the writings
and speeches on the subject are a Tower of Babel, a confusion of tongues. There are the voices saying that existential psychology is Adlerian, others that it is all in Jung, others that it is encompassed in Freud, still others that it is identical with much psychodrama, and so on. These spokesmen seem blithely unaware of their patent contradictions; if existential psychiatry is one of these things, it can not be the others. Existential psychiatry is identified with Zen Buddhism and anti-intellectual trends on one hand; or with a super-intellectual philosophy composed of untranslatable German terms on the other. It is said to be therapy that everyone does when he is doing good therapy, and also to be—especially in its classical phenomenological wing—a philosophical analysis having nothing to do with the practice of therapy as such.

You recall that in the Tower of Babel myth in the book of Genesis, the Lord sent the confusion to confound the pride and grandiosity of the builders. I suspect that another purpose, or at least opportunity, that this confusion of voices lays upon us now is to force us to cut through the bandwagon tendencies, the fad tendencies, and to ask ourselves with complete frankness and hard-headed incisiveness, “What are the constructive and the destructive trends in this development?”

First, however, if we are to understand this development at all, we must see it in relation to the cultural conditions that gave birth to it. It was called forth by the experience of tragedy, especially in Europe between the two wars, by the confronting of the contradictions in modern rationalism; and by the conviction that our usual approaches to the science of man in psychology and psychiatry did not touch the nature of man or the deepest well-springs of his behavior and experience. Dr. Henri Ellenberger remarked to me that in the period between the two wars the sensitive European found discussions of “libido,” “sexual repression,” and so on shallow and superficial in the face of what was then actually taking place in Hitler, the breakdown of humanism and other aspects of Western man’s cataclysmic self-destructiveness. In moments of tragedy the question of satisfactions is strangely unsatisfying. Our European colleagues believed, too, that our sciences of man played into the very tendencies in the modern industrial developments to sap the individual’s sense of worth and responsibility.

I make no apologies in admitting that I also take very seriously, as will have been evident already, the dehumanizing dangers in our tendency in modern science to make man over into the image of the machine, into the image of the techniques by which we study him. This tendency